

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY DIET IN WILMINGTON

Not only did early Wilmingtonians throw away their broken dishes and bottles in dumps in their backyard or in privies, but they also threw away remains from their suppers. And, of course, they unknowingly left behind seeds of digested plants in the privies they used.

The number of food remains in some trash dumps and privies was very large. In the layers of fecal materials from the cistern on the Market Street property, archaeologists recovered over 1000 pieces of bone and about 7000 seeds.

The bones were found through normal excavation of trash areas in the seven blocks. Most were recovered during the screening of dirt from the deposit that was being excavated. However, this type of artifact recovery is not suitable for collecting seeds, as they would easily fall through the 1/4 inch mesh screens that were used during excavation, so a different process was used. While an area or privy was being dug, a sample of dirt was collected and set aside. The dirt was then returned to the archaeology lab and dumped into a basket with a very fine mesh that was sitting in a large metal barrel filled with water. The heavy artifacts, like broken dishes and glass that were in the collected dirt, sank to the bottom of the basket, while the lighter material, such as seeds, floated to the top and could be easily scooped out, dried, and examined under a microscope.

One interesting observation from the study of bone and seeds found in the seven block area was that the quantity of bone that was thrown away in the rear of yards appears to have changed over time. Rear yard areas that dated to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had a fairly high number of bones, mixed in with other trash such as broken dishes and bottles. Rear yards that can be dated to the middle of the nineteenth century contained very few bone fragments in comparison. Surprisingly, in the earlier time period the privies did not always

have more bone fragments than the open trash areas in the rear of the yards. One excavation unit, ten feet by ten feet in size, dug on the block bounded by Orange and Tatnall Streets, produced over 1000 bones from a layer of the area's original topsoil. This layer dated to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The cistern on Market Street, which dated to around the same time, contained only 400 more bone fragments than this old topsoil layer. Apparently, the occupants of these properties did not care if piles of smelly garbage lay at the rear of their properties.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the privies were the areas that had the most bone, rather than the open rear yards as in earlier times. Possibly, people's views of sanitation had changed, or perhaps trash collection had become more established.

The types of food remains found in the privies and trash dumps are basically the same types of foods that we eat today: beef, pork, lamb, poultry, fish and fruits. Types of meat that were consumed by early Wilmingtonians which are not usually found in our local supermarkets today were goat and goose.

To get an idea of the types of food eaten by the people that once lived in this seven block area, food remains of the well-to-do family and families who used the cistern on Market Street will be examined. Then we will look at Dowdall's bottling works on Front Street, and the lower income families or individuals that lived on West Street south of Second, around 1860. But first, let us look at some trash deposits on properties on Market Street, north of the one containing the cistern. These other Market Street properties contained buried trash layers that dated to the 1770s and 1780s.

The types of foods found in these early trash remains included cow, pig, chicken, turkey, fish and goose. What was so unusual about the food remains from these properties was that archaeologists found bones usually associated with the

initial butchering of animals, such as parts of the skull, split backbone pieces, and teeth. It appears that in the later part of the eighteenth century people were doing their own butchering on their own properties. They were probably buying live animals at local markets or possibly from farmers in the area.

Surprisingly, very little seed material was found in these very early trash deposits. Those found were mostly from wild plants which were probably deposited by wind and water or other natural events. It is possible that the open nature of the trash permitted the elements to destroy the fragile seed remains.

Unlike the bones found in these trash deposits in the upper part of the King to Market Street block, the bones from the cistern property on Market Street showed evidence of professional butchering. Thus by 1800, households probably no longer butchered their own meat. The types of meat cuts observed in the trash from the cistern included many very familiar cuts, such as short loin, short rib, and short plate portions of meat in addition to shank knuckle or arm pot roast and steak cuts. There were also pin bone sirloin and rump roast cuts.

Pork bones were generally from "Boston" butt and picnic meat portions and spare rib and ham cuts. Other types of bone included sheep and goat, chicken, turkey, goose, and quite a few fish bones. Oysters and clams were also consumed by the households using the cistern.

The cistern had a very large number of seeds from both wild and domesticated plants. These included sweet cherries, grapes, figs, watermelon, apples, and raspberries. It is interesting that many of the trash deposits in the seven block area contained fig seeds. As this plant contains a large number of seeds in each fruit, the high number of seeds recovered by the archaeologists is not surprising. The presence of fig seeds in many areas may mean that many early Wilmingtonians grew fig bushes in their backyards.

The bone and seed material from Dowdall's bottling works were much fewer in number when compared to those from the cistern. Bone types and the cuts they represented were basically the same as in the cistern. One interesting difference was that the trash filled trench on Dowdall's property had a few examples of professionally butchered pig. It seems that before 1850, pig was usually not professionally butchered, but later became much more common.

Very few domesticated seeds were found in the one privy on Dowdall's property. This was the only area of the yard from which a sample for seeds was taken. The only domesticated seeds were from grapes. Wild plant seeds were more common, with raspberries being the most numerous. Unlike the cistern, the people living and working at the bottling works were not throwing away many food items. It is possible, however, that they were thrown out elsewhere or were burned. It is also possible that all the trash found on Dowdall's property was thrown away at the time he was closing his business, cleaning out his "factory". Or, perhaps the next tenant did the cleaning before he moved in. Thus, there would be little food debris, since the trash found by the archaeologists had not accumulated over the entire time the bottle works was in business.

The last property we will look at is the one on West Street, south of Second Street. After 1845, this property appeared to have been occupied by a blue collar individual and possibly his family, and then a second household that appeared to have fallen on hard economic times moved in. The types of meats represented by the bones from this property are basically the same as found on Dowdall's property and on the cistern property. What is different for the West Street property is the amount of different bone types. The second privy, which dated to around 1859, had the greatest amount of pork bones of the entire seven block area. Also, both privies had a very high number of wild animal remains, such as fish, crab, oysters, clams, and possibly turtle. It appears that these wild animals were an important

part of the diet of the people living on this property. It should be noted that the cuts of meat from these two privies were similar to those found in the other trash areas within the seven blocks.

Seeds from this property included cherry, grape, watermelon, fig, apple, pear, and the ever present raspberry. Raspberries were found all across the seven blocks. This wild fruit must have been very easy to obtain during the summer months, and it appears that Wilmingtonians took full advantage of this wild crop.

If the families and individuals that lived on the West Street property were poorer than those on the other blocks that were excavated, it is not apparent in the seed remains or in the cuts of meat that were represented by the bone remains. However, the large quantity of pig and wild food remains does suggest that these people were purchasing or acquiring larger amounts of more inexpensive foods than the households on Dowdall's property, the property with the cistern, and the trash areas on the upper portion of the Market to King Street block.

The study of food remains not only showed us what early Wilmingtonians ate, but we also learned that people of different economic standing ate somewhat different things, and that the way food was prepared before cooking (i.e., butchering) changed in Wilmington over time. And of special note, the study of these food remains gave us some idea of when the artifacts from Dowdall's business may have been thrown away.